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SUBJECT: LABOR PARTY PRIMARIES POSTPONED, PERHAPS TO NOVEMBER

REF: TEL AVIV 3894

Classified By: Political Counselor Norman Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) The Labor Party Central Committee's June 26 decision to postpone party chairmanship primaries -- originally scheduled for June 28 -- until after an open-ended investigation into party registration irregularities, could delay the primaries until after disengagement and possibly until November, after the Jewish holidays. Former candidate for prime minister Labor MK Amram Mitzna told poloff June 27 that the date of the Labor primaries is a "65 thousand dollar question," but speculated that they would likely be put off until November. Mitzna said that an alternative time would be at the beginning of September, during implementation of disengagement, but that timing would make any second round voting fall during the Jewish holiday period. Mitzna said that within two or three days, the general timeframe for the primaries will be clearer.

2. (C) The Labor Party Central Committee debate on the postponement was cut short June 26 when a brawl broke out between former MK Addiso Masala, a supporter of candidate Amir Peretz, and supporters of candidate and former PM Ehud Barak. Newly elected party Secretary General Eital Cabel quickly closed the debate on the two motions and brought them to a vote: Cabel's proposal to postpone the primaries until sometime after the investigation into membership drive irregularities, and Peretz's proposal to postpone the primaries by only three weeks. Some 60 percent of Central Committee members approved Cabel's proposal. Mitzna estimated that the investigation will take at least one month to complete, noting that investigators will be confirming the membership of each of the party's some 80,000 new members.

3. (C) Observers speculate that of the five party leadership candidates, Peretz could lose the most from the postponement, since a drawn out race could slow the campaign momentum that lifted him this past week to the number two spot, behind interim party Chairman and Vice Premier Shimon Peres. Mitzna, for example, said that there is "no doubt" that Peretz will lose momentum. Mitzna assessed that Barak, Matan Vilna'i and Binyamin Ben-Eliezer would likely benefit from a longer delay. Barak gained critical support in the last two weeks, moving from last place to third. Peres first advocated a three-week delay, but eventually supported the open-ended delay, reportedly after meeting with Cabel June 24. As current front runner, Peres could well lose support in a longer race, but, as Mitzna noted, he could also gain support, since he remains in a very visible a government leadership position.

4. (C) Asked about the party repercussions after the brawl at the Central Committee meeting, Mitzna said that it actually might have been a good thing for the party. Elaborating, Mitzna said that the party appears to have hit a low, and perhaps there can be a real chance now "to clear the roads."

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